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Philosophy and the Lyric

Peter Lamarque

Abstract

The paper surveys and comments on some of the issues that arise about the lyric in philosophical, principally analytical, aesthetics. In brief these are: definition, expression, paraphrase, form-content unity, experience, and truth and profundity. The paper shows in each case why these issues are important from the perspective of analytical philosophy but also why lyric poetry is not always an easy subject matter to accommodate to standard analytical presuppositions. It might be thought that theories of meaning within philosophy of language (be it semantics, speech act theory or truth-conditions) should be applicable to a full range of linguistic usage. But lyric poetry confounds that expectation and yields a context where familiar models of meaning and communication can seem inadequate. Yet analytical philosophers should not simply dismiss poetry as somehow exceptional or aberrant but would gain from looking afresh at basic assumptions to see how their views about language might be broadened and modified.

Keywords: poetry; expression; meaning; poetic experience; poetic truth

This is a brief critical survey of some of the issues that arise about the lyric within analytical philosophy or specifically within analytical aesthetics. In fact the more immediate context for thinking about the lyric within analytical aesthetics is the relatively new field “philosophy of poetry” (Gibson 2015).

It is helpful to think of aesthetics, broadly conceived, as essentially a value enquiry: one that seeks to characterise and find value in peculiar kinds of sensuous or imaginative experience. Philosophy of poetry, as a branch of aesthetics, is also about value and also, I suggest, about kinds of experience. It is an enquiry emerging from philosophy of literature, which is in turn a specific application of philosophy of art, itself a branch of aesthetics (Lamarque 2009c).

1. Definition

Analytical aesthetics has often been obsessed with definition (“necessary and sufficient conditions”), yet not many sustained attempts have been made by analytic philosophers to define poetry (far less the lyric), and there is no broad consensus (Ribeiro 2007). Perhaps the demand for definition is less pressing in this case given that poems on the whole are easy enough to recognize. However, attempts even by literary critics are rarely without controversy. Terry Eagleton offers a rough and ready definition which he suggests might “turn out to be the

best we can do”: “A poem is a fictional verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end” (Eagleton 2007, 25). Yet this is problematic on many counts, not least because reference to the “fictional” makes its application to the lyric tendentious. Jonathan Culler, for example, has argued that “[t]he positing of a fictional speaker-character is an inappropriate general strategy ... [that we must] reject ... as a general model for the lyric” (Culler 2015, 122). Yet significantly even those critics, like Culler, who seek to theorize about the lyric seem more concerned with characterising core aspects than with pinning down a strict definition. In this spirit Culler himself, almost incidentally, describes the lyric as “short, nonnarrative, highly rhythmical productions, often stanzaic, whose aural dimension is crucial” (Culler 2015, 89).

Arguably a more helpful approach, rather than focusing on definition, might be to attend to the practice or practices of those who deal with poetry (and the lyric). No doubt there is some culture-relativity here but at a generic level the practice-based approach involves identifying attitudes, expectations, responses, or judgments that are conventionally or characteristically brought to bear on poetry by (knowledgeable) practitioners: poets, readers, commentators, those who appreciate or find value or pleasure in poetry. This is not a sociological but an analytical enquiry. It might even be conceived in Kantian transcendental terms, asking *what reading and appreciative protocols must be in place if poetry is possible*.

Without an established practice with its own concepts and conventions there would be no distinction between poetry and non-poetry and no way to identify the values of poetry. Some simple facts about the practice are easy to discern. Whatever a poem might look (or sound) like, if we take it as a poem we bring to it a distinctive kind of attention as broadly determined by the poetic tradition. We assume, for example, that the surface language itself is salient, that its physical textures, sound, rhythm, metre, repetitions, rhymes, are not merely incidental but integral to our attention, to be appreciated in their own right, not just as vehicles for but as identifying conditions of the content conveyed. We attend to the thoughts embodied in a poem through *this* precise mode of articulation. If we know this is the “game” that is played then our responses are shaped accordingly.

The idea of grounding the understanding of a concept within a (more or less loosely) rule-guided practice, an idea ultimately derived from Wittgenstein, is now a familiar move in analytic aesthetics and the philosophy of literature (Lamarque/Olsen 1994). So the philosophy of poetry might profitably be seen as the exploration of a practice, not the search for a definition.

2. Expression

The lyric has a long and culturally diverse history so generalisations must be treated with caution. A significant, but not all-encompassing, part of that history is the Western romantic tradition which associates the lyric (as emphasised by Hegel) with subjectivity, expressiveness and a personal response to a situation or emotion. Conventionally, although not necessarily, lyrics in this tradition use the first person “I”. It should be noted that some pre-romantic lyrics—most obviously those in the sonnet tradition, Petrarch, Thomas Wyatt, Shakespeare, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser—also utilised many of these characteristic features. It is the practice associated with this broader conception of the lyric that has attracted the attention of analytic philosophers given their own longstanding interest in many of these aspects, in expression, emotion, reference, the self, “I”. Problems familiar to literary critics become refocused for philosophers.

Take this simple lyric by Emily Dickinson:

My river runs to thee:
Blue sea, wilt welcome me?

My river waits reply.
Oh sea, look graciously!

I'll fetch thee brooks
From spotted nooks,—

Say, sea,
Take me!

(From Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Boston, 1924)

The poem has an emotional intensity, pleading, yearning (“Take me!”). But who is the speaker (the “I”) and the addressee (“thee”, “Blue sea”)? What is the metaphor of the river running into the sea? Is it about death, the soul flowing into the vast sea of heaven? Is it about love? Is the speaker offering herself to a lover? We need not linger on interpretation. But the philosopher will ask: what kinds of speech acts are these? Is “wilt welcome me?” a genuine question, is “Take me!” a genuine command?

J. L. Austin famously stated:

we could be issuing any of these utterances, as we can issue an utterance of any kind whatsoever, in the course, for example, of acting a play [...] or writing a poem – in which case of course it would not be seriously meant and we shall not be able to say that we seriously performed the act concerned. (Austin 1979, 241)

He also said, even more notoriously: “language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language” (Austin 1962, 22; italics in original). The implication is that the speech acts in Dickinson’s lyric are not real questions or commands, they are not “seriously meant”.

Monroe C. Beardsley, the New Critics’ principal philosophical spokesman, consolidated Austin’s view, albeit in a less contentious formulation: “the writing of a poem, as such, is not an illocutionary act; it is the creation of a fictional character performing a fictional illocutionary act” (Beardsley 1970, 59).

But Austin has been frequently attacked on this point, not only in famous debates with critics like Jacques Derrida, Christopher Ricks and Geoffrey Hill but more recently by philosophers, most notably Maximilian de Gaynesford in a series of articles (de Gaynesford 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011). De Gaynesford argues that in suitable circumstances genuine performatives can occur in poetry and that it is important that this be recognised (de Gaynesford 2009a, 13). Jonathan Culler concurs, stating it would “be wrong to embrace for lyric a notion of performativity correlated with fictionality” (Culler 2015, 128).

Who is right here? What kinds of utterances are lyric poems? Underlying all this is a genuine fault-line between what might be called Romantic and Modernist conceptions. The legacy of Modernism is to stress the “autonomy” of the work and to insist that if an emotion is expressed in a poem then necessarily attribution of the emotion is to a poetic speaker or persona, not directly to the poet or to any psychological state of the poet; it is the language of the poem that is expressive and the linguistic mode is fictional. In contrast, the legacy of the Romantic tradition holds that poems, in particular lyric poems, reflect something deeply personal about the author and even if the scenario depicted in a lyric is fictional (which it is sometimes but not always) the poet’s own sensibility is always on show.

Lyric poets do indeed sometimes (often?) invent scenes that are both expressive and fictional. Emily Brontë’s poem “Remembrance” is one such in which the “I” refers to a persona, not directly to Brontë herself (the example is famously

discussed in Leavis 1952-3). It is a dramatic monologue. Brontë envisages a lover returning to a loved one's tomb year after year yet slowly coming to move on, to relinquish the intense emotion it stirs ("Sweet Love of youth, forgive, if I forget thee, / While the world's tide is bearing me along"). The poem begins like this:

Cold in the earth—and the deep snow piled above thee.
Far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave!
Have I forgot, my only Love, to love thee,
Sever'd at last by Time's all-severing wave?
(From Emily Brontë, 'Remembrance', *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, New York, 2005)

For those who stress the inherent fictionality of the lyric such dramatic monologues are paradigmatic, in effect expressive but not personal (or autobiographical). For those who deny that the lyric is necessarily fictional, these examples are neither paradigmatic nor in themselves impersonal. On the latter view, Emily Brontë the poet—like Emily Dickinson in the earlier example—is deeply implicated in the nature and resonance of the expressed emotion. It is *her* emotion even if not grounded in autobiographical fact.

The philosopher Jenefer Robinson has sought a middle way between the two standpoints in what she calls a "new romantic theory of expression" (Robinson 2005, ch. 9). Her emphasis is on the poet's *articulation* of an emotion which, following R. G. Collingwood, she thinks not only characterises and clarifies but also, in a sense, brings into existence the emotion itself. Discussing Shelley's lyric "To a Skylark", she writes:

he conveys his breathless awe at the bird's glorious song as well as his downcast feelings on thinking about the world in contrast with the bird's song. Shelley has given us his *reflections upon* his emotional experience as well as a sense of what the experience is like. (Robinson 2005, 279, italics in original)

Earlier she stated: "We get a sense both of the poet's wishes and values and of how those wishes and values affect his cognitive appraisals about the skylark and the human world" (Robinson 2005, 278). This marks a subtle, and surely important, refocusing on the poet in a full appreciation of the lyric, a challenge to the more extreme demands of "autonomy". It also reinforces the timely reminder from Culler that "many poems are messages that speak of the world and ask us to consider it in a particular light" (Culler 2015, 36).

3. Paraphrase

T.S. Eliot described as a “commonplace” the idea that “the meaning of a poem may wholly escape paraphrase” (Eliot 1975, 110-11, quoted in Leighton 2009, 167). The “resistance” of poetry to paraphrase, or at least the “problem” of paraphrase, arises from the simple thought that to try to capture in different words what the poem is saying would be to abandon precisely what gives the poem its interest and its very identity. The point follows from the basic reading protocol, mentioned earlier, whereby the language of a poem invites attention to itself.

Analytic philosophers have a central interest in meaning so the thought that there is a linguistic usage such that the meaning of a sentence can be expressed in only one way is both intriguing and puzzling. It is a fundamental principle in the philosophy of language, when language is considered as a vehicle for thought, that there must be different ways, in principle, in which *the very same thought* might be expressed (Lepore 2009).

But the debate about paraphrase and poetry is rife with confusion. What is the status of the claim that poetry “may wholly escape paraphrase”? Is it an empirical claim to the effect that however hard readers try they are just not able to come up with adequate paraphrases? Is it a matter of degree, with some poems easier than others to paraphrase? Or is it some kind of necessary truth, such that it is impossible in principle to come up with a precise paraphrase? Or is it more like a prescription? – avoid trying to paraphrase poetry. On reflection it seems that none of these is quite right.

There has been some interest from philosophers in recent years. Peter Kivy (Kivy 1997, Kivy 2011) has argued that paraphrase is not a special problem for poetry once it is recognised what criteria of “sameness of meaning” are appropriate. If it is demanded of paraphrase that it involve the “reproduction of the poem’s total effect on the reader” then of course it is impossible. But such a criterion is “nonsensical” because “it demands of paraphrase something that never was the object of the exercise in the first place” (Kivy 1997, 105). But arguably, although Kivy appeals to a commonsense conception of paraphrase, he has not got to the heart of what is problematic about paraphrase and poetry. After all, when Cleanth Brooks coined the phrase “heresy of paraphrase” (Brooks 1968) he was not saying what can or cannot be done but what should or should not be done.

In contrast, the philosopher of language, Ernie Lepore, has defended the unparaphrasability of poetry by appeal to what he calls *hyperintensionality*, the presence of “linguistic environments in which replacing an expression with its synonym changes meaning” (Lepore 2009, 195). Quotation is an example.

Although *bachelor* is synonymous with *unmarried man*, substitution will not preserve meaning (or truth) in the move from:

‘bachelor’ is the first word in ‘bachelors are unmarried men’ to
 ‘unmarried man’ is the first word in ‘bachelors are unmarried men’

Lepore claims that poems too create *hyperintensional* contexts: “poetry, like quotation, doesn’t support substitution of synonyms because it harbors devices for being literally (partly) about their own articulations” (Lepore 2009, 195): and if a poem is “partly constituted by its own articulation ... it is not re-articulable in another medium” (Lepore 2009, 193).

Lepore’s suggestion reinforces the thought that there is more to the unparaphrasability of poetry than just the contingency of what can or cannot be done in practice. However, it is questionable whether poems really are (even partly) about their own articulation: the idea seems too solipsistic, too inward facing. And although *hyperintensionality* might give an insight into the semantics of poetry, it offers little more to an explanation of the value of poetry, in particular the lyric, than already noted in the fact that in reading poetry special attention is invited to the precise language used.

So perhaps a better way of thinking of unparaphrasability is less as a brute fact about poetic usage, more as a convention in the practice of poetry itself: not something *discovered* by readers in reading poetry but something *demanding* within the practice (Lamarque 2009; criticised in Kivy 2011, who believes the conception is too essentialist, but powerfully defended in McGregor 2014 and Hulatt 2016).

4. Form-content unity

Why should it be that a paraphrase of a poem, however accurate, always seems inadequate, never equivalent to, or substitutable for, the poem? Part of the answer relates to another familiar commonplace about the lyric, that form and content are inextricably bound together (a view associated with A.C. Bradley’s 1901 lecture ‘Poetry for Poetry’s Sake’; Bradley 1926).

Again, though, philosophically speaking, this idea is puzzling. After all, it seems easy enough to speak of form and content separately: to identify a rhyme scheme, metrical pattern, stanza length, or poem-type without mentioning what a lyric is about, and to describe content—skylarks, melancholy, yearning—without mentioning formal qualities. How could form and content be indivisible? The clue lies in the very idea of *content* in a poem. The crucial

thought, I suggest, is that specifications of content come in degrees of “fine-grainedness” (Lamarque 2015).

We can specify content in a coarse-grained manner by identifying a subject matter (say, a visit to Tintern Abbey) or broad themes (say, melancholy). At this level poems can share the same content (just as could a poem and a paraphrase). But the more fine-grained the specification the less possible it becomes for that content to be shared: *this* response to Tintern Abbey, *this* account of melancholy. The question then arises: Is it useful to identify a level of fine-grainedness such that only the poem itself counts as specifying its own content? If the answer is Yes then both form-content unity and unparaphrasability are established but again, arguably, it is not a *fact* about a poem that it exhibits form-content unity but a *demand* made of it when it is read or valued a certain way. And the value often cited is the unique experience that a poem affords.

5. Experience

The idea that the value of a lyric poem resides at least partly in a reader’s experience of it is again puzzling for the analytic philosopher for whom the primary function of language is to embody and convey information or, more widely, in Austin’s terms, to perform other illocutionary acts. And anyway the idea of “experience” is troublingly vague. Can anything substantial be said?

No doubt the experience sought in the lyric is multi-faceted: affective, cognitive, imaginative, and also visceral, in response to the physical textures of language spoken. The lushness of these lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins is *felt*:

Let me be to Thee as the circling bird,
Or bat with tender and air-crisping wings
That shapes in half-light his departing rings,
From both of whom a changeless note is heard.
(From Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Let me be to Thee as the circling bird’,
in *Gerard Manley Hopkins, The Major Works*, Oxford, 1986)

But the relevant experience is not just phenomenological. It emerges from that special kind of attention that the lyric invites: in brief, an attention to a form-content unity. A subject is perceived and imagined through the forms of its presentation. What is experienced is the subject through a fine-grained perspective. The relevant experience is unique to each work. Of course there is a high degree of subjectivity in the experience of individual readers (and readings by the same reader at different times) but there is also an important level of shared response (Attridge 2015, 167-8). It is instructive to think of a

certain species of poetic interpretation less as a search for *meaning* more as a way of encouraging a sharing from one reader to another of the experience a lyric can offer (Lamarque 2009a, 417-9). The emphasis on experience is important for highlighting aesthetic as well as semantic aspects of language and it connects the lyric naturally to other arts, in particular music, painting, and dance, where experience is paramount.

6. Truth and profundity

“Philosophy of poetry” is not the same as “philosophy *in* poetry”. Poetry (or verse) can of course be used as a vehicle for philosophy: Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* and Pope’s *Essay on Man* are obvious examples. But the lyric is less clearly associated with philosophy even though, in a looser sense, lyric poets will often reflect on abstract ideas (Lamarque 2009b). The emphasis on experience, subjectivity, expression, and content-under-a-perspective suggests in the lyric a different kind of “truth” from that sought by systematic philosophy or even the “truth” claimed for narrative fiction where the actions of characters invite moral, political or even metaphysical appraisal. The lyric poet might reflect on growing old, like W. B. Yeats, “An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick” (‘Sailing to Byzantium’, *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, Ware, 2000) or Philip Larkin, “Life is first boredom, then fear. / Whether or not we use it, it goes” (‘Dockery and Son’, *Philip Larkin, Collected Poems*, London, 2003). But the interest of such lines is not primarily in the literal truth or otherwise of the extracted propositions but in the way the thoughts are integrated into an aesthetic structure inviting the kind of experience we earlier characterised. Once again we can appeal to an insight from Culler that there is an important “ritualistic” dimension to lyric giving focus to “memorable writing to be received, reactivated, and repeated by readers” (Culler 2015, 37).

Can lyric poetry be profound? Indeed it can, but not in the mode of a philosophical treatise and not simply in virtue of being difficult to understand. We call a lyric profound when a sentiment or idea comes alive for us through a sense that just *this* way of expressing it is right, the form exactly consonant with the content. The clarity, integrity and precision of the expression bear an authority that has the power to grip our minds and perhaps reshape our thoughts in fundamental ways. The themes might be perennial—mortality, love, passing time, despair—but the exploration of them through subjects as varied as urns, nightingales, a train journey, can offer a perspective that is entirely fresh and illuminating, and in that sense profound.

Where a lyric, as we say, strikes a false note it is not so much a failure to “correspond with reality”, more a matter of sentimentality, cliché or insincerity. The ideas or emotions expressed lack “authority” because they seem poorly

thought out, too glib, derivative or lacking precision. Lyric poetry is profound through bringing to mind and crystallising thoughts that are original, powerful and affecting.

It is instructive for analytic philosophers to reflect on a conception of truth of this kind that seems fundamentally different from the propositional truth defined by philosophy. Indeed all the topics briefly sketched here relating to the lyric—practices, expression, speech acts, paraphrasability, form and content, poetic experience, and profundity—suggest ways in which thinking about language can be extended and enriched in this unusual context, well beyond the familiar paradigm of sentences imparting information and corresponding with facts.

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